



Big Men Discussion Guide

Director: Rachel Boynton

Year: 2013

Time: 99 min

You might know this director from:
Our Brand is Crisis (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

More means more, right? More oil means more wealth for the people of the country where that natural resource originates. But As **BIG MEN**, a tale of oil, corruption, and greed in Nigeria, Ghana, and the U.S. shows, that is not always the case.

“We’ve got a tiger by the tail,” declares Jim Musselman, CEO of Kosmos Energy, the Texas-based oil exploration firm that in 2007 uncovered the first large reservoir of Ghanaian oil ever. Director Boynton makes intimate contact with Musselman and all parties concerned in the ensuing years. Hope floods the air as Jubilee Field is celebrated - from the men at Kosmos to the high-risk investors at Blackstone Capital, from George Owusu of E.O. Group and Ghanaian President John Kufuor to the people living at the bottoms of society’s rungs.

And then greed comes racing in. And corruption follows. Boynton takes us to Nigeria, interviewing militants of the Niger Delta region, who have been struggling to survive despite their country having some of the richest oil deposits in the world. She tracks the story to Ghana, gaining astounding access as kings are met, inside deals are whispered, and the common person struggles to put food on the table. She hears the same thing repeated: big man, big man, big man. Everyone wants to be a big man. And Boynton meets the “big man” himself: GREED.

BIG MEN does not speculate, but rather delivers concrete evidence that the poverty of plenty is rife, that the more natural wealth on tap, the more despair on display, and that no matter where one calls home, the similarities between us are greater than our differences. Without offering answers, without waxing lyrical on the rights and wrongs, **BIG MEN** shows us the whole story, from top to bottom, wealth to poverty, joy to despair. Perhaps this time around, in Ghana at least, the big man will make way to the greater good.

FILM THEMES

As natural resource wealth brings more devastation than advancement, human instincts appear animalistic at best, and regardless where in the world one calls home, everyone seems to want to be a “big man”.

GREED AND CORRUPTION

The thought of money excites people, offering glimmering possibilities. “Just imagine the life I could live.” When opportunity like big oil presents itself, the struggle for wealth becomes a savage game. Fighting for individual ends, grasping for the lowest tax bracket or contribution to make, big business comes swathed in greedy robes. “When there’s a lot of money at stake, people’s focus gets more intense,” explained Jeffrey Harris of *Blackstone*. The focus on more for few and less for many gets intense. Greed is ravenous and stops at nothing to fill its aching gut. Is greed an intrinsic human trait, corruption its side effect?

BIG MAN SYNDROME

“If you have money – illegally or legally – you are a big man in Nigeria,” explained a Deadly Underdog militant. Everybody there wants to be a big man, standing taller than the rest, puffing out his chest with pride of the conquest. In Western society one isn’t as quick to admit these carnal impulses, but they are there all the same, manifested through a slightly different mechanism with the same greedy engine behind them. Yet boy, girl, man, woman – nearly everyone has ambitious dreams that for some becomes twisted into a competitive game. Bini Pere III G.O.E. Tiemo says it best: “It is an instinct in every human being to be well to do.”

RESOURCE CURSE

Common sense states that the more natural resources a country possesses, the more wealth to be reflected in that society. As with many things that involve humans, however, the opposite often paves the way, and resource curse – or the poverty of plenty – ensues. As proven time and again in societies across the globe, the more natural wealth on offer, the more impoverished the society. When a Norwegian delegate spoke in Ghana about his country’s successful attempts at turning their oil wealth into societal advancements, it fell flat at the feet of those in charge. Resource curse appears to have plenty of merit.

REPUTATION

“Reputation’s everything,” stated Brian Macted of *Kosmos*. In order to advance in the corporate world, the big men on top must play their cards right, consider the chainlink repercussions involved in every move, every decision. Casting Musselman to the side to replace him as *Kosmos*’ CEO appeared to be no skin off Macted’s nose, although they had previously declared themselves close friends. Is it really that different in Nigeria, where close allegiances are thrown by the wayside for the chance to be a big man in possession of wealth? In Ghana, where oil wealth remains to be divvied up, if the past is any gauge of the future, where greedy reputations are behind the wheel, the future is dim.

“There will always be a scramble for oil until it’s replaced by something else. People suddenly see an opportunity for wealth. Without a certain discipline, vision, or solidarity, you could end up like rats trying to climb out of a cage. It’s a question of who you think your own are.”

Kyeretwie Opoku

“Everybody wants to become big. That’s the prayer of everybody.”

Bini Pere III G.O.E. Tiemo

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

- 1. What were your initial feelings following BIG MEN? What are five words you would use to describe the film and how it made you feel?
- 2. What do you feel was director Rachel Boynton’s main message in BIG MEN?
- 3. Discuss the varying sides of the issue presented in BIG MEN. What side, if any, was director Boynton on?
- 4. Do you think Ghana will head in the same direction as Nigeria in terms of the government mishandling of oil money? As Ghana is a much smaller nation, does it have a fighting chance to make good with its newfound wealth?
- 5. Ghana would have arguably never discovered oil without big-money investment searching for it. How much of a say should Kosmos Energy and other Western oil exploration companies have in poor nations once they have unearthed such vast wealth? Who should be the main beneficiary of resources?
- 6. Is greed an intrinsic human characteristic? Discuss. Think of any personal examples from your life or the lives of those around you.
- 7. How important is your reputation in what you do? Do you bear your reputation in mind when considering your actions, both personal and professional?
- 8. Does everyone want to be a “big man,” amassing as much power and wealth as possible in a lifetime? Discuss your personal “big man” aspirations. Can the human appetite ever be satiated?
- 9. Discuss five negatives and five positives associated with capitalism, defined as “a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products are owned by individual people and companies rather than by the government.” Do you believe government should have more or less of a say in the actions of individuals and businesses; i.e. Texas oil discovery = individual control vs. Ghana oil discovery = government control.
- 10. What is your definition of corruption? Can you provide any examples of corruption in your community?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- BIG MEN was placed high on many viewers' lists after premiering at Tribeca in 2013, including being the number one film on iTunes for a period of time, and scooped up the Grand Jury Prize at the International Environmental Film Festival and the International Green Film Award at the Cinema For Peace awards.
- After pursuing Kosmos Energy for over a year, director Boynton was finally invited to their offices, at which point she convinced them to let her interview and film them after giving a PowerPoint presentation. Filming for BIG MEN took place over the course of seven years, and the on-location film team in Nigeria, Ghana, New York, and Texas always consisted of Boynton and a photographer. During the course of this time, Boynton had two children and traveled so extensively that she filled up two passports. In her words, BIG MEN is a film about capitalism, "looking at the fundamental conflicts in the way things work today."
- At their first meeting, Boynton told Kosmos: "Movies are good for your reputation."
- Boynton traveled with journalist and filmmaker Sebastian Junger in Nigeria, who helped her gain access to militants in the Niger Delta.
- As of 2015 Kosmos had offices in Bermuda, Suriname, Mauritania, and Ghana, and was exploring in offshore blocks of Ireland, Morocco, Portugal, Senegal, and Western Sahara.
- Since 2011, Jim Musselman has worked as CEO of Caelus Energy LLC, mining for oil in Alaska.
- Ghana, which means "Warrior King" in Mande, was the first African nation to declare its independence from European colonization, breaking free from the U.K. in 1957. With a 2014 population of 27 million, Ghana is one of only five African nations with a free press, has one of the highest school enrolment rates in Africa, and is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, classified as a middle income country. Ghana has Africa's fifth largest oil reserves and is the world's second largest producer of cocoa.
- Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," is the most populous African nation and seventh most populous in the world, with 174 million inhabitants. Declaring independence from the U.K. in 1960, over 500 ethnic groups inhabit its landmass, around twice the size of California. The Nigerian economy became Africa's largest in 2014, surpassing South Africa, and is considered an emerging market by the World Bank.
- Resource curse, also referred to as the paradox of plenty, is the phenomenon when nations rich in natural resources – specifically non-renewable ones – have less economic growth than countries with poor resources. This paradox happens for many reasons, including a decline in other economic sectors and government corruption.
- Brad Pitt is the executive producer of BIG MEN.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Friends of the Nation, a "socio-environmental advocacy, non-profit, non-governmental development-oriented organization" in Ghana, works to improve life for the average person. Learn more on their website.
2. Oxfam International actively works in both Ghana and Nigeria to improve living conditions. Visit Oxfam's website to learn of the many ways to help them in their work.
3. Learn more about the West's dependence on oil and how that affects poor nations rich in oil, fueling corruption and greed. Oil Change International works to take the politics out of fossil fuel money.
4. Amnesty International campaigns against human rights abuses where natural resources are being mined, specifically in the oil, gas and mining industries. Consider joining them in their cause.

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